



The Role of the Military in Mine Action

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Introduction

This article is drawn from a study conducted by the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) entitled *A Study of the Role of the Military in Mine Action*, published in September 2003.¹ The study was commissioned by the United Nations, and sought to address issues such as the suitability, appropriateness and capability of the military to undertake mine action. The findings show that while using military actors in mine action is not always appropriate, militaries can play a positive role.

Select Findings From the GICHD Study

The Use of the Military in Mine Action

Two main types of military personnel have the potential to carry out mine action tasks: the members of the national armed forces of the mine-affected country ("local military forces") and military units or individuals from armed forces other than those of the affected state ("visiting military forces"). Local military forces may be carrying out a national mine action programme, acting either as the national authority or as a component of a national programme, or may be providing soldiers to be trained as deminers under a "military to military" training scheme. These schemes normally involve the military from a western army assisting the local military of a developing nation.

Visiting military forces may be composed of military units and individuals deployed under a UN or other peacekeeping mission, on a landmine-specific assignment or under some other arrangement. Visiting military forces may include individual instructors or Technical Advisors (TAs) assisting in UN-sponsored mine action programmes, instructor teams under bilateral "train the trainer" programmes or specialists in support of specific parts of national programmes, such as teams establishing mine detection dog (MDD) projects, mine risk education (MRE) projects, or information management systems. Assistance may also include the provision of equipment, but experience has shown that heavy military minefield breaching equipment (usually based on a battle tank) is not suitable for humanitarian demining.

The Use of Local Militaries

Local armed forces begin with some advantages in mine clearance. They typically have experience with landmines and other UXO, their salaries are already paid, they possess a logistics support system, including communication and medical back-up, and are organized to operate as a team. Local military forces may have the necessary equipment for demining, but if not, this can be provided by visiting forces bilaterally or multilaterally.

Thus, in many contexts, military forces have been widely used in mine action, including humanitarian demining, although with varying degrees of success. In Nicaragua, for instance, all demining has been carried out by the Nicaraguan army and its effectiveness has been greatly enhanced by support from visiting military forces operating under the auspices of the Organization of American States (OAS). On the other hand, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the use of entity armed forces (EAF) in demining has been expensive and demining accidents have been unacceptably high in the initial phases when compared to commercial companies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In Cambodia, the armed forces have made a relatively limited contribution to humanitarian demining to date, though the study recommends that their role and contribution be reviewed. This is due to the recent improvements in organization, training and equipment of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF), as well as the declining donor funds for the civilian mine action structures in-country.

Military forces often operate in environments where information is restricted and controlled, and they may be reluctant to provide data and information to others. This makes coordination difficult, if not impossible, and duplication and gaps likely. In many contexts, local military forces are reluctant to accept coordination or instruction from a civilian authority. For example, this appears to be the case in

Clearing mines for humanitarian purposes demands specific expertise, which may not necessarily be gained as a result of ordinary military training or experience. Also, morale among deminers serving in local military forces may be low, depending on salary and conditions, and conscripts do not make the best deminers. It should not be forgotten that military deminers are first and foremost soldiers and as such will be used as combat engineers if hostilities re-emerge. In the aftermath of an internal armed conflict, the national army may not be perceived as neutral and may not be welcomed by affected communities. In these situations, it is better not to use the military or assign them tasks that do not bring them into contact with a community, such as the clearance of military barracks or airfields.

Cambodia. In Lebanon, the military has seemed reluctant to take external advice on mine action, although information sharing has reportedly improved. Similarly, in Nicaragua, after early difficulties, coordination with the National Demining Commission and visiting military forces seems to have significantly improved.

The study did not find much evidence of the use of the military in the other areas of mine action. While the military may be able to provide warnings about the technical dangers of landmines and UXO, they are not suited to undertake community-based MRE programmes, where social issues and helping to develop alternative coping mechanisms are important. In a few cases, the local military may have provided immediate medical care to a civilian mine victim, though they do not become involved in the provision of prosthetics or rehabilitation activities. Very few militaries anywhere in the world have played an active role in calling for a ban on AP landmines. The one other area where the local military has been seen to play a significant role is in stockpile destruction in those countries that have signed the AP Mine Ban Convention (MBC). Destroying stockpiles of mines requires logistic support, such as inventory control, transport and unpacking prior to destruction. The local military can undertake these labour-intensive tasks.

Visiting Military Forces

Many armed forces possess considerable expertise in mine action, including managing and overseeing demining and explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) programmes, especially in emergency situations. The positive elements they may bring are experience, knowledge of techniques and advanced EOD skills, and in a number of cases, some knowledge of the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS). A number of the case studies in the GICHD report, notably Bosnia-Herzegovina and Nicaragua, show that demining accidents have been reduced due to training and oversight from visiting military forces.

However, in mine-affected countries where there is both local military and civilian involvement in the mine action processes, visiting military forces tend to view their mission as fulfilling a rather narrow service. Cooperation and coordination with civilian structures are not always accorded adequate priority, which can lead to compartmentalization of the assets being delivered. Certain missions may even be undertaken without any direct knowledge of the civilian organizations operating in the same theatre.

Bilateral arrangements between militaries can be appropriate when the local military is largely or entirely in charge of a country's mine action programme. Such agreements, however, may not provide an adequate planning and programming framework when there are multiple local and international actors involved, as programming complexity increases geometrically as the number of actors increases. As an example, it is possible that a National Mine Action Authority (NMAA) or a UN Mine Action Centre (MAC) may be working in conformity with locally adapted standards, but a visiting military force may be training on a different interpretation. The IMAS represent an international set of standards that may be adapted and interpreted differently by each host country, making no two countries' technical procedures or standard operating procedures (SOPs) exactly alike. Often, such disparities will become evident only late in the programme cycle as an increasing amount of operational responsibility is assumed by the national authority. The implications of this may involve duplication, unnecessary cost or the need to re-clear land. Again, the need for a strong, central national coordination body established early in the life of a programme is seen as important in avoiding these situations.

UN peacekeepers have rarely engaged in large-scale humanitarian demining or EOD tasks (Kosovo being a notable exception). Thus, although UN peacekeepers have been present in Lebanon for more than two decades, they have typically conducted only mine clearance to support their own operations, and according to their own national military procedures. Though this may be consistent with the obligations of parties to a conflict under international law to be responsible for mines, booby-traps and other explosive devices laid by those parties, it does not necessarily lead to substantial remediation of the problem in humanitarian terms. In fact, throughout the more than 20-year experience in Lebanon of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), as seemingly simple a task as the handover of records concerning their mine clearance work between incoming and outgoing contingents appears not to have been accomplished.

Use of Military TAs

Visiting militaries have often assigned military personnel to serve as TAs to the various MACs and project implementation units. Many of these have performed admirably, and the secondment of active military personnel appears to have been a successful strategy for getting a mine action programme up and running in an emergency phase and in highly specialized roles, such as EOD.

However, the GICHD study has concluded that the overall contribution of these secondment programmes has proven modest in the long term. There have also been criticisms of the role played by some TAs, on the basis of unclear chains of command and reporting lines and confused terms of reference. It has also been claimed that coordinating authorities have sometimes failed to exploit fully their skills and potential contributions to the programme. Thus, a number of the case studies in the GICHD report, while acknowledging an important role for in-kind military advisers at the outset of a mine action programme, express concern about their contribution over the long term in a development context. This is the case in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Cambodia in particular, where TAs may not necessarily have been equipped with the skills needed to sustain mine action. Nor are TAs necessarily experienced in building local capacities through advising their local counterparts.

In 1999, in Cambodia, for instance, the Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC) hosted 76 TAs, both military and civilian. A review by UN Development Program (UNDP) concluded that, "while the military has made an impressive contribution in developing capacity within the CMAC, particularly technical capacity, in general military advisers are less suited to meet the training needs and capacity demands CMAC now faces." Indeed, TAs may end up learning more about mine action than do their national counterparts. These difficulties are compounded by tours of duty—typically six months—that are often too short for the individuals to make an effective contribution to the programme.

TAs can represent a significantly high cost for a mine action programme. The incremental costs associated with any foreign duty assignment of personnel from visiting military forces may be at least as high as the full cost of engaging equally well-qualified civilian personnel for the same assignment. In addition, a different framework for employment would allow for the termination of the assignment of an employee whose performance proved to be unsatisfactory—something that cannot readily be done with personnel seconded on a temporary basis from a visiting military force.

Enhancing Combat Capacity

The provision of assistance to local military forces for mine action purposes, in the form of training and/or equipment, has sometimes been controversial as these can also enhance combat capacity. The nation providing military assistance must carefully consider the potential ramifications of supplying training or equipment to a military force. The historical evolution of the conflict, the current peace and reconciliation developments as well as the nature of the military structure and deployment must all be weighed against the potential benefits of military support for mine action prior to the provision of assistance. There is no real mechanism to decide this, as most military-to-military assistance is provided on a bilateral basis.

Conclusion

The GICHD study on the role of the military in mine action found that the military has played a significant role in a number of national mine action programmes. This can be either through involvement by the local military forces or with support from a visiting military force. Invariably, at the end of a conflict, local militaries will need training and equipment to enable them to undertake humanitarian demining tasks according to international standards. The decision to provide such support will need to be carefully weighed against the risk of enhancing their war-fighting capabilities, and what phase of the post-conflict period it is. The study was unable to determine if it was cheaper to use the military for demining tasks, as productivity and cost effectiveness are areas that require further study in the whole mine action sector. The use of visiting military forces on the other hand, has been found to be most effective in the emergency or start-up phase of a national mine action programme.

Wherever there is a mine or UXO problem, humanitarian and developmental initiatives necessarily involve a high degree of contact and interaction among military personnel, non-military mine action personnel and local communities. Military capabilities, if properly directed and controlled, can bring important skills and organizational assets to complement many mine action activities, particularly in the emergency or start-up phase of a programme. Military organizations are normally trained to be mission-oriented and to complete these missions as quickly and efficiently as possible. This works well for almost all military problems, and indeed for many humanitarian problems like infrastructure repair, but establishing national mine action programmes under post-conflict conditions normally requires a longer-term approach than a military "task-oriented" one. Military actors are unlikely to have the best idea how mine clearance fits into the larger mine action picture.

The component activities of mine action have to be closely coordinated if they are to work at all and military staff are well-versed in the concept of how many interlocking components make up a plan. Mine action plans require a similar degree of integration, but this planning has to take place with a number of different agencies, both military and non-military, which often have different perspectives and agendas. All the actors must be prepared to submit to overall coordination and direction. This does not mean interfering in the established military "chain of command," but that the broader issues like national strategies and priority setting for all the aspects of mine action are developed in a consultative manner with the full range of actors.

Copies of the study, The Role of the Military in Mine Action, are available in hardcopy from the GICHD or can be downloaded from the GICHD website at www.gichd.ch.

Endnotes

1. See www.gichd.ch.

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